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van Lange, P.A.M.; Taris, T.W.; Vonk, R.

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Dilemmas of academic practice: Perceptions of superiority among social psychologists

PAUL A. M. VAN LANGE and TOON W. TARIS
*Department of Social Psychology, Free University,
Amsterdam, The Netherlands*

and

ROOS VONK
Leiden University, The Netherlands

Abstract

The current research examines social psychologists' beliefs regarding the probability of self and others to engage in desirable and undesirable actions relevant to solving dilemmas of academic practice (e.g. openly discussing versus concealing complex effects in a paper). Consistent with hypotheses, results revealed that social psychologists believed that others are more likely than they themselves to engage in undesirable actions and less likely to engage in academically desirable actions. Moreover, the probability of undesirable actions by both self and others was perceived to be greater under conditions of low rather than high perceived traceability (i.e. when others within the field are believed not to verify the appropriateness of the actions). Interestingly, but unexpectedly, this latter result was observed among faculty members but not among individuals with less research experience (i.e. graduate students). The discussion considers possible explanations for this latter finding and closes with an implication relevant to the peer review system. © 1997 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Addressee for correspondence: Paul Van Lange, Department of Social Psychology, Free University at Amsterdam, Van der Boechorststraat 1, 1081 BT Amsterdam, The Netherlands, email address: Pam.van.Lange@psy.vu.nl.

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INTRODUCTION

Every now and then, the enterprise of publishing about scientific research involves dilemmas. For example, should one describe very complex effects in a paper, seemingly uninteresting effects that may further complicate the message one wants to bring across? To what extent could one mimic excellent sentences produced by others, and how explicitly should one cite these sentences? Indeed, the accumulation of knowledge through scientific research is, to some extent, guided by norms regarding academically desirable and academically undesirable actions. Such norms include accuracy, replicability, and novelty of the contributions to the literature, and presumably are developed to serve the collective interest of a scientific discipline—the accumulation of knowledge.

The current research examines social psychologists' beliefs regarding the probability for self and others to engage in desirable and undesirable actions relevant to solving dilemmas of academic practice. Using insights derived from literatures regarding self–other judgement and social comparison, we attempt to understand: (a) how beliefs regarding the actions of other social psychologists relate to beliefs regarding one's own actions within dilemmas of academic practice, and (b) whether the rated probability of desirable and undesirable actions is influenced by perceived traceability, or the probability that others within the field will verify the appropriateness of these actions.

Do We Think We Are Better Than—and Not as Bad as—Our Fellow Social Psychologists?

One pervasive social-cognitive tendency of people involves self enhancement, the tendency to process social information in ways so as to maintain or improve a favourable evaluation of the self. Such tendencies may partially account for self-enhancing interpretations of success and failure experiences (e.g. Miller & Ross, 1975; Zuckerman, 1979) and for the belief in a multifaceted self, ascribing a greater number of traits to self than to others (cf. Sande, Goethals, & Radloff, 1988). Self-enhancement may also be revealed by tendencies to self–other asymmetries in social comparison, which suggest that individuals tend to differentiate themselves from others when the comparison itself is potentially threatening to one's feelings of uniqueness (Codol, 1975; see also Hoorens, 1993). The notion of self-enhancement is perhaps most directly supported in research on perceptions of superiority, revealing that individuals believe that they are distinctly better than—and not as bad as—others. For example, people perceive themselves as more generous and honest, and less deceitful or selfish than they perceive most others or the average other (e.g. Messick, Bloom, Boldizar, & Samuelson, 1985; Van Lange, 1991).

Tendencies toward perceived superiority have been explained by the motivation to enhance or protect self-esteem along with the manner in which information about self

and others is processed. For example, individuals may to some extent filter positive information about the self and reinterpret information that is not self-enhancing (cf. Taylor & Brown, 1988). Also, tendencies toward self-enhancement and perceived superiority are facilitated by (a) downward comparison, or selectively focusing on 'inferior' others (cf. Wills, 1991), and (b) dimensional comparison, or selectively focusing on attributes that makes one's self appear superior (cf. Wood, 1989).

Frequently, perceptions of superiority are described as 'illusions' or 'biases' because it seems logically impossible for all or most of us to be better than average¹ (cf. Messick *et al.*, 1985; Taylor & Brown, 1988). Accordingly, 'social psychologists-as-observers' tend to understand perceptions of superiority by attributing illusory, self-enhancing beliefs to 'the actors' who participate in our studies. But, do social psychologists, too, think they are better than—and not as bad as—other social psychologists? Do we, too, hold what have been described as illusory, self-enhancing beliefs about ourselves? If so, such evidence would support the notion that self-enhancing tendencies exist among individuals who presumably are aware of superiority effects (and to some degree have informed others about such effects), thereby contributing to the generality of this effect. Accordingly, we predicted that social psychologists would exhibit both positive superiority, believing that they are more likely than others to engage in academically desirable actions, and negative superiority, believing that they are less likely than others to engage in academically undesirable actions (*hypothesis 1*).

What Are Our Beliefs of the Academic Practices Followed by Social Psychologists?

Do social psychologists believe that we and our colleagues are tempted to engage in somewhat undesirable actions, if we know that others could or would not verify the appropriateness of such actions? We propose that social psychologists believe that academically undesirable actions are more likely—and academically desirable actions are less likely—to the extent that the appropriateness of such actions is perceived to be less traceable (i.e. when others within the field are expected not to verify whether actions are academically appropriate). This proposition is based on the assumption that individuals hold implicit theories stating that open, public situations may facilitate collectively desirable actions, whereas closed, anonymous situations may give rise to collectively undesirable actions. This implicit theory should be held especially by social psychologists who have further reasoned that public situations allow for normative influences which may bring about social benefits or social costs (i.e. approval versus disapproval by others), whereas anonymous situations do so to a lesser extent or not at all (cf. Rettig & Pasamanick, 1964; Tetlock, 1992). Accordingly, we predicted that academically undesirable actions would be viewed as more likely under conditions of low-traceability rather

¹Whether the 'better-than-average' phenomenon actually is an illusion is less relevant than the mere fact that social psychologists have described such effects in terms of illusions or biased, distorted perceptions. Also, the theorists that have advanced this argument have also acknowledged that for skewed distributions it is logically possible for a majority to be better than average (e.g. a majority may correctly think that 'stealing' is an act more characteristic of others than of themselves) as well as for dimensions allow multiple interpretations (e.g. using their own definitions, a majority may accurately claim that they are more moral than average).

than high-traceability, and conversely, that academically desirable actions would be viewed as more likely under conditions of high-traceability rather than low-traceability (*hypothesis 2*).

We were also interested in examining whether the positive and negative superiority effects would be more pronounced if the academic appropriateness of desirable and undesirable actions is expected to be unverifiable by others within the field (low-traceability rather than high-traceability). Would social psychologists think that especially others, not we ourselves, might be tempted to engage in less desirable actions if the appropriateness of such actions is believed to be low on traceability? This may be so, particularly if undesirable (desirable) actions are considered to be even more undesirable (desirable) when such actions are not very traceable (cf. Alicke, 1985). For example, bad behaviour may be considered even 'more bad' when individuals act upon the belief that such behaviour is unlikely to be noticed or recognized by others. Thus, we explored whether the superiority effects predicted in hypothesis 1 would be more pronounced for actions perceived as low traceable rather than for those perceived as highly traceable (*hypothesis 3*).

Finally, we explored the role of academic position, whether participants are faculty members or graduate students. These two groups differ in level of research experience (i.e. conducting, publishing, and reviewing research) and may to some extent differ in familiarity with the topics examined; these groups may also differ in terms of their commitment to science. Thus, it is interesting to explore whether the predicted superiority effects or influences of traceability will be moderated by academic position.

METHOD

Participants and Experimental Design

Participants of this study were recruited at a conference organized by the Dutch Association of Social Psychological Researchers. At the 1994 conference held at Groningen, we distributed 120 questionnaires which took about 10 minutes to complete. Participants could complete the questionnaire either during the conference (and drop it in a designated box), or after the conference (and mail it to the Free University). Three weeks after the conference, a total of 57 questionnaires had been returned, yielding a 47.5 per cent response rate. The sample consisted of 30 men and 27 women; 52 worked at psychology departments at universities, and five worked at other university departments. Eight participants were associate or full professors, 17 were assistant professors or post-doctoral researchers, and 32 were graduate students (27 were working on their dissertations, and five were working on their master's theses). On average, participants were 33 years old, had 6.5 years of research experience, and had published a total of 14.07 papers.

The study involved three within-participant variables and three between-participants variables. The three within-participant variables were Desirability of Action (desirable versus undesirable), Target of Judgement (self versus others), and Type of Scenario (to be discussed shortly). The between-participants variables

included Traceability, the perceived probability that others within the field would verify the appropriateness of an action (high versus low traceability), Academic Position (faculty members versus graduate students) and Order (judgements of self preceded judgements of others versus the reversed order). The primary dependent variable involved probability judgements, asking how likely participants themselves or the average Dutch social or organizational psychologist² would be to engage in a particular action, were they facing a comparable situation.

Procedure

Each participant completed a seven-page questionnaire. The first page described the 'Complexity Scenario' which, in the low-traceability condition, read:

You are analysing the data of your research and observe that virtually all hypotheses are supported. Additional analyses, however, reveal that these results are actually quite complex, in that they appear to be dependent on other factors (e.g. the order in which the questions were asked, the experimenter's gender). You are not particularly interested in these effects and you find them hard to explain. You also think that it will be quite difficult to publish a paper in which you discuss these complex effects. While these effects may be found to be theoretically interesting in your area of research, it is uncommon to pay attention to these effects. Accordingly, were you to decide not to discuss these effects, the odds that other readers (and reviewers) will notice this are *negligibly small*.

In the high-traceability condition, the last two sentences were replaced with: 'Because these effects are found to be theoretically interesting in your area of research, it is quite common to pay attention to these effects. Accordingly, were you to decide not to discuss these effects, the odds that other readers (and reviewers) will notice this are *fairly high*'.

On the second page, the following two actions were rated. The undesirable action read as follows: 'You decide not to discuss these complex effects in the paper, and to submit this paper for publication'. The desirable action read as follows: 'You decide to discuss these complex effects in the paper after spending some time on interpreting these effects (e.g. through literature research), and then to submit this paper for publication'. The two actions were rated for desirability, traceability, and the probability of self and others to engage in these actions. These ratings will be described shortly.

The third page described the 'Copying Scenario' which, in the low-traceability condition, read:

You are writing a paper and notice in an article outside of your professional discipline two paragraphs that perfectly state what you want to say. These are exactly the two paragraphs you need to make your point in a sophisticated manner. Because these two paragraphs are coming from another discipline, the odds that others will identify these paragraphs are *negligibly small*. Your paper would improve substantially if you were to copy these paragraphs.

²In the instructions, we operationalized 'others' in terms of 'social and organization psychologists' because the ASPO conferences also tend to be attended by a few psychologists working in areas which seem more closely linked to organizational psychology.

In the high-traceability condition, the third sentence was replaced with: 'Because these two paragraphs are coming from the same area of research, the odds that others will identify these paragraphs are *fairly high*'.

On the fourth page, the two following actions were rated. The undesirable action read: 'Apart from some minor exceptions you copy these paragraphs quite literally, and at the end you cite the source in very global terms (i.e. the paragraphs will not be read as a quotation or as an important reference). The desirable action read: 'You spend quite some time on paraphrasing these paragraphs in your own words, and cite the source fairly explicitly (i.e. the citation will be read as a very important reference)'.

The last page of the questionnaire asked participants to report their age, gender, position and department at the university, research experience, number of publications, and whether they considered themselves as 'basic' or 'applied' researchers. Participants were debriefed in a newsletter of the Dutch Association of Social Psychological Researchers.

Ratings

The undesirable and desirable actions for solving the 'dilemmas' in the scenarios were rated for desirability (1 = very undesirable; 9 = very desirable) and traceability (1 = this decision cannot easily be checked by readers; 9 = this decision can easily be checked by readers). Moreover, we measured participants' judgements regarding the probability that self and others would engage in desirable and undesirable actions. Specifically, we asked 'How likely do you think you (the average Dutch social or organizational psychologists) would make this decision, were you (they) faced with a comparable situation?' Ratings were made using nine-point scales (1 = very unlikely; 9 = very likely), and we systematically manipulated the order in which these judgements for self and others were made. Finally, we should note that in the analyses reported below the *N* varies from 54 to 56 for several dependent variables due to occasional missing values.

RESULTS

Ratings of Desirability and Traceability: Manipulation Checks

Ratings of desirability were analysed in a five-factor ANOVA, with desirability of action and scenario being within-participant factors and traceability of action, academic position, and order being between-participants factors³. This analysis revealed a main effect of desirability, $F(1,48) = 464.47$, $p < 0.001$, indicating that desirable actions ($M = 7.59$ ($S.D. = 1.01$)) were perceived as more desirable than undesirable actions ($M = 2.92$, $S.D. = 1.07$). No further effects were significant.

³Ratings of desirability and traceability were analysed in separate five-factor analyses of variance, and probability judgements were analysed in a six-factor analysis of variance (the results of which will be discussed shortly). In light of the large number of analyses, and given the fact that these analyses allow for a large number of tests (e.g. the six-factor ANOVA allows for a total of 63 tests), we used a $p < 0.01$ in assessing the statistical reliability of the factors for which we had advanced no *a priori* hypotheses (i.e. the effects involving type of scenario, academic position, and order).

Ratings of traceability were analysed in an identical ANOVA. This analysis revealed a strong main effect for traceability, $F(1,46)=32.21$, $p<0.001$, indicating that actions in the low-traceable condition ($M=4.74$, $S.D.=1.14$) were perceived as less traceable than those in the high-traceable condition ($M=6.64$, $S.D.=1.04$). We also obtained a strong main effect for desirability, $F(1,46)=44.52$, $p<0.001$, indicating that undesirable actions ($M=5.06$; $S.D.=1.91$) were perceived as less traceable than desirable actions ($M=6.68$; $S.D.=1.61$). Finally, an interaction of traceability and desirability, $F(1,46)=12.67$, $p<0.001$, revealed that the influence of traceability was more pronounced for undesirable actions (M s are 3.34 ($S.D.=1.38$) and 6.23 ($S.D.=1.18$), a mean difference of 2.89) than for desirable actions (M s are 6.14 ($S.D.=1.58$) and 7.05 ($S.D.=1.55$), a mean difference of 0.91), although this latter difference was still found to be significant, $F(1,52)=4.43$, $p<0.05$. This latter effect suggests that traceability is more relevant for actions that violate some norm or expectation (i.e. undesirable actions) than for actions that would seem to be more consistent with pre-existing norms and expectations (i.e. desirable actions). Further results relevant to traceability will be considered in light of this effect.

Probability Judgements for Self and Other Social Psychologist

Judgements regarding the probability of self and others to engage in particular actions were analysed in a six-factor ANOVA, with desirability, type of scenario, and target (self versus others) being within-participant factors, and traceability, academic position, and order being between-participants factors. This analysis revealed a strong interaction of target and desirability, $F(1,48)=32.12$, $p<0.001$, yielding a pattern which is consistent with hypothesis 1 (see Figure 1). Subsequent simple effects revealed that for desirable actions, probability judgements for self ($M=6.46$, $S.D.=1.55$) were greater than for others ($M=5.74$, $S.D.=1.41$; $F(1,55)=20.83$, $p<0.001$); conversely, for undesirable actions, probability judgements for self ($M=3.54$, $S.D.=1.33$) were smaller than for others ($M=4.42$, $S.D.=1.46$; $F(1,55)=43.97$, $p<0.001$).

Consistent with hypothesis 2, the analysis revealed an interaction of traceability and desirability, $F(1,48)=6.39$, $p<0.05$. The means and standard deviations relevant to this interaction are presented in Table 1. Simple effects indicated that undesirable actions were judged to be more probable when they are perceived as low traceable rather than highly traceable, $F(1,54)=7.41$, $p<0.01$. Although the means were in the expected direction, simple effects revealed that probability judgements of desirable actions were not significantly greater in the high-traceability condition than in the low-traceability condition, $F(1,54)=1.13$, n.s. The absence of this latter effect may be due to the fact that the manipulation of traceability appeared to be more powerful for undesirable actions than for desirable actions.

Relevant to hypothesis 2, the analysis revealed a three-way interaction of traceability, desirability, and academic position, $F(1,48)=7.36$, $p<0.01$, indicating that the observed interaction in support of hypothesis 2 was reliable for faculty members but not for graduate students (see Table 1). Specifically, simple effects revealed that faculty members believed that (a) undesirable actions were more probable when such actions are perceived as low traceable rather than highly

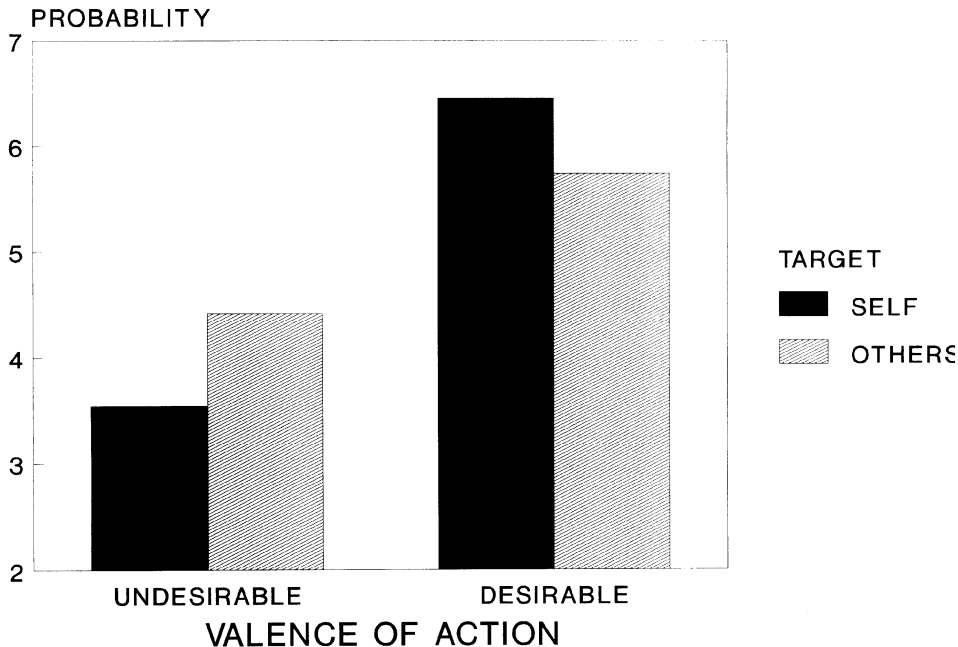


Figure 1. Probability judgements for self and others to engage in desirable and undesirable academic practices

traceable, $F(1,23)=6.46$, $p<0.02$, and (b) desirable actions were less probable when such actions are perceived as low traceable rather than highly traceable, $F(1,23)=8.11$, $p<0.01$. Among graduate students, however, there was no significant effect of traceability on probability judgements of either undesirable actions, $F(1,31)=1.28$, n.s., or desirable actions, $F(1,31)=0.90$, n.s.

We failed to find support for hypothesis 3. The absence of a significant interaction of traceability, desirability, and target, $F(1,48)=0.10$, n.s., indicates that the

Table 1. Mean probability judgements and standard deviations (within parentheses) as a function of desirability, traceability, and academic position

| Desirability Traceability | Low | | High | |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| | Low | High | Low | High |
| Academic position | | | | |
| Graduate students | 4.14 _a (1.02) | 3.60 _a (1.40) | 6.41 _b (1.06) | 5.94 _b (1.54) |
| Faculty | 4.81 _b (1.23) | 3.59 _a (1.09) | 5.42 _c (1.49) | 6.89 _d (0.89) |
| Means | 4.50 _b (1.17) | 3.59 _a (1.28) | 5.88 _c (1.38) | 6.27 _c (1.35) |

Note. Significant differences within rows are indicated by different subscripts, $p<0.05$.

superiority effects were not moderated by low versus high traceability. The only other significant effect was an interaction of desirability and scenario, $F(1,48) = 17.42$, $p < 0.001$, revealing that the desirable ($M = 5.77$, $S.D. = 1.76$) and undesirable actions ($M = 4.69$, $S.D. = 2.00$) in the complexity scenario elicited smaller differences (i.e. a mean difference of 1.08) in probability judgements than those in the copying scenario (respective M s are 6.43 ($S.D. = 1.80$) and 3.28 ($S.D. = 1.67$), a mean difference of 3.15). It is possible that participants believe that they and others are more likely to conceal complex effects than to mimic others' sentences without acknowledgement because (a) the former action might be to some extent motivated or rationalized by the idea that such effects do not tend to be theoretically important (for details, see scenario instructions) and/or (b) the latter action reflects a form of plagiarism, and thus may be judged as highly unacceptable and therefore less probable. Finally, not surprisingly, we observed a main effect for desirability, $F(1,48) = 62.17$, $p < 0.001$, indicating that undesirable actions ($M = 3.98$, $S.D. = 1.30$) were rated as less probable overall than desirable actions ($M = 6.10$, $S.D. = 1.36$).

DISCUSSION

The present findings provide good evidence in support of positive and negative superiority among social psychologists, thinking that they are more likely than others to engage in desirable actions and less likely than others to engage in undesirable actions when faced with dilemmas of academic practice. This evidence supports hypothesis 1 and indicates that self-enhancing tendencies exist among individuals who presumably are aware of superiority effects (and to some extent have informed others about such effects), thereby contributing to the generality of self-other beliefs which have been described as illusory or biased. The current findings are mute as to the specific mechanisms that account for the superiority effects, and whether these superiority effects stem from 'biased' perceptions of the self, others, or both. However, given that participants believed that others are at least somewhat likely to engage in academically undesirable actions, two mechanisms would seem especially important. First, participants may have intentionally brought to mind a subset of scientists that is relatively likely to engage in academically undesirable actions (cf. downward comparison; Wills, 1991). Second, such a selective focus on others that are somewhat inferior to self may also occur in a relatively unintentional manner. For example, thinking about academically undesirable actions may elicit images or stereotypes of some social psychologists (real or imaginary) that are more negative than positive (cf. stereotype salience; Weinstein, 1980; see also Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995).

A second major finding was that social psychologists believed that undesirable actions are more likely—and desirable actions somewhat less likely—if the odds that others will verify the appropriateness of these actions are believed to be low rather than high (i.e. evidence in support of hypothesis 2). This pattern, however, was only observed among faculty members and not among graduate students. Faculty members differ in a number of ways from graduate students, yet one important difference seems to be the amount of experience the two groups have with conducting and publishing research. One interpretation would be based on the

notion that due to their greater level of experience (conducting research as well as publishing and reviewing research), faculty members may have acquired more evidence suggesting that authors actually do at times engage in slightly biased presentation styles. Moreover, given the tendency for individuals to assign greater weight and attention to specific information that is negative rather than positive (cf. Skowronski & Carlston, 1989), it is understandable that individuals with greater experience are more likely to form an impression that the field engages in 'slightly biased presentation styles as long as it cannot be verified'. A second interpretation gleams from the idea that, relative to graduate students, faculty members may be more strongly committed to certain models or theories, and therefore tend to assign greater importance to the theoretical idea itself than to the 'subtleties' suggested by the data or procedures. This explanation is particularly relevant to accounting for the effects observed for the complexity scenario.

Finally, the current research revealed no evidence in support of hypothesis 3, predicting that superiority effects would be more pronounced if the odds that others would verify the appropriateness of desirable and undesirable actions are believed to be low. In retrospect, this may not be surprising because undesirable (and desirable) actions were not rated as more undesirable (or more desirable) when the odds that others will be able to verify or notice such actions are low rather than high.

Implications, Strengths, and Limitations

We wish to briefly outline some limitations and issues for future research. One limitation derives from the fact that (a) we have used only two scenarios describing specific dilemmas of academic practice, and that (b) only two actions—desirable and undesirable actions—were rated in terms of probability. In reality, individuals may encounter a more varied set of dilemmas and may consider various alternatives, evaluatively less extreme actions that were not included in this study (e.g. in the complexity scenario, one may decide to briefly report complex effects in footnotes). A second limitation is that our sample may have been coloured by a selection bias. Indeed, we cannot exclude the possibility that scientists who tend to engage in desirable academic practices are more likely to participate in surveys relevant to the subject matter of the experiment, than those who might not exclusively engage in desirable practices.

One strength of the current research is that the beliefs relevant to dilemmas of academic practice is a rather novel and interesting topic for future research (cf. Kerr, 1995). Many textbooks on research methods include a section on communication of research and ethics (e.g. Judd, Smith, & Kidder, 1991), describing accuracy, replicability, and novelty as important criteria for reporting research. Yet very little is known as to how dilemmas of academic practice are perceived, which practices are believed to be common or how scientists evaluate their own actions in relation to those of others within the field. We wish to close by outlining that the current findings—the superiority effects, in particular—are of potential relevance to understanding how the peer-review process might work within social psychology and related fields. For example, in writing papers, people may to some extent think that others take a 'benefit-of-the-doubt' approach in their evaluations of some ambiguities in the paper (e.g. incomplete information regarding procedure or

analyses), thinking that others would take these for granted. However, in our roles of reviewer (or reader), we might be more likely to take a somewhat more critical approach, assuming that others tend to engage in rosy—yet slightly biased—presentation styles. Thus, one implication of these superiority effects could be that ‘we-as-authors’ might be disturbed about some detailed questions and doubts expressed by reviewers, whereas ‘we-as-reviewers’ might be convinced that such questions and doubts are appropriate and useful in light of the accuracy, replicability, and novelty of the contribution.

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